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CIA Read Letters To and From Red Lands for 20 Yrs.

By JOSEPH VOLZ

Washington, March 21 (News Bureau)—Chief U.S. Postal Inspector William J. Cotter disclosed in testimony made public today that for 20 years CIA agents, working out of John F. Kennedy Airport in New York, opened and read mail to and from Communist countries.

Cotter, himself an ex-CIA agent, told a House Judiciary subcommittee that a series of postmasters general, beginning with Arthur Summerfield during the Eisenhower Administration, approved the operation. CIA Director William E. Colby has said that all opening of U.S. citizens' mail was stopped in 1973.

Plan to Fight Criticism

In another development, the hard-pressed agency whose public image has been suffering one crisis after another in recent weeks, has decided to launch a counteroffensive. David Phillips, chief of Latin American operations, is quitting to head up a former agents group. The group will defend the agency.

The spies virtually took over the postal facility at Kennedy, according to Cotter. "The employees of the CIA were authorized to actually shuffle mail, and sort mail and get it in the categories they wanted," he said. The agents were mainly interested in persons writing to the Soviet Union. A postal worker was "maintaining observation" on the spies, who were supposed to take addresses, not open the mail.

Cotter conceded that the postal worker must not have been watching too closely during his 18 years on the job because the spies "surreptitiously did slip some of these letters in their pockets, or something like that, removed it from the premises,

opened it, took pictures of it."

Cotter said he was "pushing to get rid" of the project in 1971, but was overruled by then-Postmaster General Winton Blount. Cotter said Blount told him, after talking with then-CIA Director Richard Helms, to carry on with the mail opening.

Former Attorney General John N. Mitchell was also briefed "and thought the project was fine," Cotter testified.

A former CIA operative, Mel Crain, now a San Diego State University professor, said that his operational intelligence branch received copies of opened letters during the 1950s. Crain said that his supervisor told him it was in the "national interest" to open the mail, but conceded it was "unconstitutional and illegal."

Acheson Was Unconcerned

Crain said that he was unable to have the practice stopped, turning even to former Secretary of State Dean Acheson, who "displayed little, if any concern."

Rep. Robert Kastenmeier (D-Wis.), Judiciary subcommittee chairman, declared, "The public has the right to expect that the mail, even mail to foreign friends, is not subject to the insidious snooping by zealous agents of the federal government."

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